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# TENDENCIES OF ART IN AMERICA.

(Concluded from page 110.)

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IN the January number of the AMERICAN ART REVIEW we gave attention to some of the present phases of our art. While we indicated there that in the grasp of style, or in the endeavor to master the technical elements, lies the most prominent characteristic now apparent in the pursuit of art among us, it would yet be unjust to limit our observations to this point alone.

Until recent years the practice of the pictorial arts in America has been confined to oil-painting. So strong, indeed, has been the predilection in this direction, that the sister arts have not only been neglected by the artists themselves, but the great public of buyers and amateurs has actually been inclined to scoff at such noble mediums for the expression of the beautiful as water-colors and black and white. Nothing could better indicate the startling suddenness with which public opinions are formed in this country than the rapid growth and appreciation of almost every branch of art among us during the last decade. The American Water-Color Society has in less than three lustres exhibited an originality, a virile and enduring vitality, in the character of its annual exhibitions, which compares most favorably with that displayed by our other art associations. In the matter of feeling and technical excellence a few of our best aquarellistes seem to occupy perhaps a higher relative position than our painters in oil-colors. This may be due, partly, to the fact that they have leaned less upon foreign instruction, and that therefore the merit we find in their works is more their own.

As in England, so here some of our leading oil-painters have also given their attention successfully to aquarelle, and the most encouraging sign of the times is this, that the public are awaking to some appreciation of the qualities of color, atmospheric effect, and dash of treatment which are peculiar to this art. Without giving any opinion as to the comparative merits of oil and water-colors, it is not too much to say that a certain degree of culture is essential on the part of the public in order to enjoy a good water-color painting. As with our oil-painters until quite recently, so also with our water-color painters: they succeed best in landscape. Messrs. Smillie, R. Swain Gifford, Wyant, Samuel Colman, Farrer, and others we might mention, are all landscape artists. What may eventually be done here in *genre* and interiors by this medium is indicated, however, by such spirited scenes as those dashed off by a promising young colorist, Mr. Muhrman.

But the defect hitherto far too common in our art, the impression of weakness, the absence of commanding inspiration founded upon seemingly inexhaustible resources of feeling and fancy, is also apparent in our water-color exhibitions. Pleasing scenes we find there, sometimes tender sentiment, often much skill in the technical part of the picture, but rarely such force or overpowering energy and resistless impulse or pathos as are evident in the water-colors of Turner, Copley Fielding, or Frederick Walker. Winslow Homer, in a remarkably vivid, but sometimes crude style, seems to suggest as well as any of our painters, in his *genre* and landscape sketches,

the possibilities of aquarelle in the future of American art. The impatient, imperative dash of his brush indicates a consciousness of power seeking expression in an original manner, but inadequate results naturally follow on experiment not yet crowned with complete success. Even in its incompleteness, however, we regard such art as among the most encouraging signs that we are destined, sooner or later, to present indigenous ideals with native modes of expression, and that our worship of foreign art is to be limited to admiration, instead of the present servile imitation, assimilating, it may be, but not borrowing or copying from it. Epictetus says, "If you emulate a man greater than yourself, you will succeed ill in that, and also lose the merit of those excellences you might be able to attain." That is the bane of our art now. We are in the full tide of the imitative period, and shall not find out what we are really capable of achieving until we try to walk alone. Such efforts as Mr. Homer's give hope of an approaching emancipation, after we have mastered the syntax and prosody, or technicalities, of art.

Closely associated with the movement in favor of water-colors is the rage for decorative art—including flower-painting and the decoration of pottery—which is now so prevalent among our cultivated circles. Even after the numerous amateurs, especially of the fair sex, who find a harmless vent for their otherwise unemployed energies in painting tiles and china and panels, have been deducted, the residuum of professionals who are endeavoring to make a living out of this branch of art is still something extraordinary. In flower-painting they sometimes show great dexterity, and occasionally a good eye for the harmony of colors. Still, one of the weak points in our art—defective composition and deficient imagination—is apparent in too many of these elaborate copies from nature.

But in the application of flower-painting to decorative work we find at last some appreciation of the difference between this and other forms of art. It is too early, however, to speak with confidence regarding decorative art in America. For clever as much of it is, it is nevertheless thus far so entirely based on imitation,—openly avowed, it is true,—that with rare exceptions small opportunity is afforded for even surmising our native ability. Long ago the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Byzantines, and the followers of Gothic art of the Middle Ages, invented certain forms of decorative work; and in the far East the Chinese, Hindoos, and Japanese, while all developing national traits in their art, also formulated certain general principles which underlie the whole question of decoration. These nations almost seem to have exhausted the powers of invention, both as regards the harmony of colors and the importance of certain conventional floral or geometric forms. They did not write much on the subject, but they were moved by profound and correct instincts, and now we hopelessly admire their works, and seek to do by learning what they did by the sheer force of pre-eminent genius.

Exuberant fancy and correct impulses were in their case guided by an equally correct taste, while in our age we endeavor to supply the lack of genius and originality by elaborate treatises on art, philosophic formulas in explanation of the harmony of color and the like, founded on a study of the matchless works of our predecessors in this field. It is with our decorative art as with literature. Homer and Shakespeare create, and ages after come the rhetoricians who codify the laws of literary style, not from *a priori* reasoning, but from the analysis of works which give them a basis upon which to found their theories.

It is certain, however, that, if we cannot originate new forms or combinations of color, but must exercise our faculties in decorative art in the imitation of the works of other ages and climes, it is at least praiseworthy to proceed on knowledge, and by this method overcome to a degree both the lack of genius and the difficulty of invention in a field already so many times ploughed and harvested. The excessive refinement of society in our day, amounting almost to an affectation, has somewhat the same effect on our decorative art as it has on the *cuisine* from which we draw our nourishment. In our excessive passion for refinement we prefer flour that is bolted so white that the nutritious qualities are largely and injuriously eliminated. It is the same spirit which takes the snap, the *verve*, the character, out of much of the decorative art

of the day. It is delicate and pretty, and sometimes ingenious; but it fails to hold or kindle the imagination, because, with all the knowledge it displays of archaic art, there is yet something missing which we find in the barbaric art of Persia or Japan. Like so much of our food, it lacks character. Roman, or Saracenic, or mediæval art proclaims itself at a glance. Its individuality is pronounced in no unmeaning terms, and by no possibility can it be mistaken for any other. But of modern decorative art—if we except that of the Asiatic races of to-day, and the vigorous but semi-barbaric metal-work of Russia—we are rarely able to decide the nationality on the strength of internal evidence alone.

The colorless, characterless, insipid methods of modern decoration are noticeable, for example, in the tiles which are now extensively used in some of our cities for the external adornment of houses. Properly used, the effect of string courses of tiles may be admirable. But how do we employ them? Setting aside the question of color, for these tiles are sometimes out of tone, we find almost without exception that the designs on them are so delicate and minute, that, when raised a story or two above the ground, the pattern runs together and becomes as meaningless as the pepper-and-salt grays of a summer suit of clothes.

The crudeness of the public taste regarding the whole question of decorative art is also evident in the frequent disparity between the interior decorations or furniture and the building that contains them. It is the most common thing in the world for people of some refinement and culture to furnish their houses in a manner that is out of all keeping with the character of the house, and we are thus ludicrously reminded sometimes of a small boy trying to assume a dignified air with his grandfather's hat, spectacles, and gold-headed cane. This error will doubtless right itself in time, but it is at present too much the leading trait of this branch of art in America. We would not deny, however, that a very great advance has been made in decorative art in this country of late years. Good taste is far more prevalent than it was ten years ago, and the number of those who have shown themselves capable of reaching a certain proficiency in this department is already noticeably large.

But, while encouraged by these signs, we must not allow ourselves to be deceived into accepting them as final and definitive. With a few exceptions, to be hereafter noted, our decorative art is almost wholly imitative of contemporary European art. Like that, it is based on study and deliberate analysis. It is intellectual, but scarcely ever inspirational, and is even less national than the styles which it imitates. Until it advances a stage further, indicating more originality and race expression, it is simply a sign of taste, without necessarily implying promise.

Although less inclined, however, than some to place a high estimate upon the efforts of our decorative artists in general, we note here and there a few signs that faintly suggest the possibilities of high achievement, like the first touches of light which tinge the edge of the clouds at dawn while the sun is yet below the horizon. Amid the gray monotony of mediocre excellence we hail with joy these harbingers of a splendor whose effulgence shall only be seen by those of another generation. In the decoration of pottery ware, for example, Miss McLaughlin, of Cincinnati, seems to lead the way to fields yet untouched by the Minton or the Lambeth potteries, while in mural decorations the late Mr. Hunt suddenly achieved signal success. This was all the more surprising, because nothing of the sort had ever before been seen in this country; for the crude attempts made in the Capitol at Washington were of a character so fearful and wonderful that we may well say, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us" from any more like it in the future.

In the interior decorations of Mr. La Farge, especially those of Trinity Church, Boston, we find another hopeful sign. Not so much in the matter of form, however, as in a successfully harmonious combination of colors. Mr. La Farge is an idealist and experimentalist, whose art, like that of the other leading decorative artists of the day, is based on a profound study of the art of other times, combined with the scientific formulas of the present day. But what gives to his works a freshness and vitality that we do not always find elsewhere is the fact that he brings

to his aid a fine instinct for color. Like Mr. Hunt, this artist experimented in various directions before the proper opportunity occurred for a just expression of his ability. He has painted landscapes and figures, but hitherto his most successful efforts have been shown in the painting of flowers. Not rigidly confining himself to the exact truth of forms, but treating them rather in a decorative manner, he has rendered with exquisite feeling the illusive spirit of these favorites of nature. It is exactly the qualities suggested in works of this kind for which he now finds a more adequate expression in such elaborate compositions as the frescos of Trinity Church and the stained-glass windows of Memorial Hall at Cambridge.

That these works are all that we could wish is scarcely true, but they are the results of a move in the right direction, and are carried out on correct principles. The art of the glass-stainer in our day is not so much a modern invention as an attempt to reproduce a lost art. We have more scientific knowledge than the great men of the Middle Ages, and to cope with them in questions so largely mechanical, and aided by the chromatic treatises of our time, would seem a simple matter, if it were not such a well-defined law that true art, the highest art, is always indigenous to its own age and clime, and is the result of certain unvarying principles, ever reappearing under new adaptations, which spring from necessity. Mediæval stained glass originated in the desire of softening the light which poured through the broad windows of Northern Gothic structures. When a necessity exists, the men to meet it arrive: therefore it was the most natural thing in the world that stained glass, inspired by the right feeling, should be invented to meet that emergency. Those also were times when men erred not by excess of refinement. If it was necessary to strike, they struck quickly, forcibly, and decisively; if it was urgent in their natures to paint or carve, they did it earnestly, boldly, and with such grand conceptions of the central and dominating idea that they did not allow it to be smoothed away by excess of detail, or that over-refinement which in our day has ruined not only the art of individual artists, but endangers the art of races. And this is the chief reason why, with all our scientific knowledge, our artists in stained glass have so often failed; they have lacked vigor and earnestness, they have not known what to say, and have generally utterly failed to grasp the idea of the wholly decorative character of stained glass, which requires its designs and combinations of colors to be adapted to the buildings in which it is to be placed. But these conditions are agreeably approximated in the windows recently designed by Mr. La Farge, who realizes the true character of this art, and gives us reason to hope for more careful and important work in the future. We can only wish that he may find adequate opportunities for giving it expression.

In the rapid development and exceptional excellence of our decorative art in metals we recognize another sign of the possibilities of success for which we may justly hope in this department. The toreutic art in other times was conducted on such different principles that it seems much more the result of genius than the best art of to-day. Then some cunning artificer like Vischer, Cellini, or Ghiberti wrought in his studio alone, or with a few assistants. His designs were chiefly hammered out from his own fertile fancy, and had all the merit of original invention and spontaneity. The execution, also, was largely his own, and the impress of individual genius was on every part of his immortal creations.

But art in metals is practised in an altogether different fashion to-day. A company of capitalists is formed, who resolve that they will, by studying the popular demand, turn out gold and silver wares, and model their patterns somewhat as the dressmakers decide upon certain shapes for the fashions of the season. Men of some ability in designing are employed to furnish models, seconded by artisans who can deftly mould, hammer, and engrave. As soon as a hit is made by one house, imitations at once spring up. The general result is that a vast amount of work is manufactured, of more or less beauty, but the individual is eliminated from it. Personality, the most precious element in art, goes for nothing in the creation even of such elegant productions as those of Tiffany & Co. The firm name is stamped upon the work; the gold

medals are given to them; but who, beyond a few artists, ever hears of those who design the noble vases and salvers and goblets which have given the house such a world-wide repute? Nor is this so unjust as appears at first sight, for the individual designer actually counts for less in these modern art manufactories than in the humble studios of the Orient or the Middle Ages, where with the simplest means work was done that will endure to the end of time. The *repoussé* work, the remarkable imitations of Japanese metals, or the clever adaptations of classic decorative art, are produced after an exhaustive study of the art of all ages by several designers associated in consultation, including perhaps a partner of the firm. They consult, compare notes, and arrive at certain conclusions as to the adaptations of foreign art that would take best in the existing state of the market. And thus, although the result may be very elegant and agreeable, and show great technical skill, it is but slightly inspirational or individual. This is the rule in most modern decorative art, whether it be that of the Lobmeyers of Vienna, the Havilands of Limoges, the Mintons of London, or the Tiffanys of New York. Now and then a Solon or a Braquemond is known outside of the work-shop, but generally the designers for these firms must be content to forego ambition, "that last infirmity of noble minds." These observations apply with nearly equal force to the greater part of contemporary architecture, not only of our own country, but also of Europe, even if we admit the vast improvement it has made in America within the last fifteen years. But, while thus considering our decorative art to be in an imitative stage, we are willing to concede that encouraging evidences of originality are here and there apparent.

Another sign of promise in our art, and one of its most marked tendencies, is the growth of interest in black and white art, including book illustration. Although the art of some races has seemed wholly dependent on color, yet we think it must be admitted that, on the whole, form lies at the basis of the scale, succeeded by *chiaro-oscuro* and followed by color. The best black and white art, or *camaieu*, includes the first two stages, and may be strong either in linear drawing, or in light and shade, or in both. Our artists seem thus far to have been strongest in the latter, although the increasing attention given to study from the life is beginning to develop decided improvement in the drawing of the simple line, not only with correctness, but still more with feeling for the subtle suggestions of which it is susceptible. The public taste for black and white, although still quite limited and immature, is beginning to assume definite proportions, and has given rise to at least one association devoted exclusively to exhibitions in this department. We refer to the Salmagundi Club, an institution of no little vitality. In time let us hope its exhibitions may possess the interest and importance of the Dudley Gallery of London. The appreciation awarded to such portraits as Mr. Rowse has executed with crayon is an encouraging sign, while it must be granted that the public are yet slow, almost hopelessly slow, to comprehend and value the effective landscapes in charcoal for which we are indebted to such artists in this line as Hughes or F. Hopkinson Smith. Patience! all things come to him who waits, we are told,—even appreciation to the long-toiling and little-rewarded artist,—although sometimes it only comes after he is gone. "The laborer is worthy of his hire," is a Scriptural statement which has no application in art and letters. For our idealists in black and white, who are not coining a living out of illustrations for the magazines, there is beyond question a Purgatory of waiting in store before they see the light gleaming on the walls of Paradise, if, indeed, they ever do see it.

But for our illustrators the lines are fallen in pleasant places. It is about an even race between them and the portrait-painters in the division of shekels, although we have too good an opinion of many of them to think this is a leading object in their pursuit of art. No factor has done more to create a popular taste for art in America than the department of illustration, assisted as it has been by the enterprise of important illustrated monthlies. If we do not anywhere find in this country designers moved by the vast intellectual resources, moral earnestness, and exhaustless invention of a Dürer, a Blake, or a Doré, we yet find abundant

ability, and here and there one who with a larger experience may give us profounder suggestions than any yet apparent in our art.

Imagination, the sacred creative power that allies the artist or the poet to the great Creator himself, is the scarcest quality in American art, while it is fundamental and precious beyond every other quality. Many of our artists know enough about the *technique* and the principles of their profession. Through some mistake Fate neglected to endow most of them with imagination to any appreciable degree. That is all that is lacking in our art: it will probably come to the artists of the future, and when it does come we shall know it. It will be self-assertive, and speak with resistless power. No further imitation of foreign art then,—no subserviency to schools, no servility. It will burst its bonds and utter great thoughts in a great manner of its own.

In the mean time let us not complain of the very encouraging premonitions we actually have of the coming genesis of such an art. No department of our æsthetics seems to us more thoroughly national, original, and on the whole satisfactory. Years ago Darley showed a pleasant fancy and a graphic skill in his well-known linear drawings for Rip Van Winkle. How much he was indebted for them to Retzsch's outline illustrations of Schiller's ballads we cannot tell, but there was yet considerable originality in his style, which, however, quickly became mannered. In the department of landscape illustration since then some excellent work has been done by such artists as Fenn and Thomas Moran. It has been free, conscientious, and pleasing, founded often on a careful study of nature, and inspired by fine feeling. But it is in the drawing of the figure that our illustrators are at present displaying the most originality and merit. Weakness in composition, or a failure to preserve the general effect, is often noticeable in these efforts, owing, probably, to a lack of study, or inability to grasp the scene depicted with the realization of life. But we see more evidence of imagination among the artists engaged in this department than in any other branch of our present art, and in a few cases like Mrs. Foote, F. S. Church, Kelley, or Abbey, this characteristic is a prominent and most promising trait. Since Vedder first startled the art public of America by some of his extraordinary creations, we have had no artist who seems to have so vivid and versatile an imagination as E. A. Abbey. He seems to apprehend the various qualities of pathos and humor, of form and *chiaro-oscuro*, together with the suggestive and essential traits of landscape when it is requisite to introduce them into a composition. We should say that what is the especial peculiarity of his genius is a certain quaint, delicate, and sometimes grotesque humor, which crops out even in some of his most sombre compositions; as one has said of Sterne's preaching, that, even when he was exhorting his audience with his most moving periods, he seemed like a jester, with a twinkle in his eye, and on the point of flinging his cap and bells at the congregation. We sometimes detect a weakness in the composition of some of Mr. Abbey's designs, resulting doubtless from want of early training and too rapid execution. But the discipline of his present studies abroad will have a maturing and improving effect on a genius whose progress is of importance in our art.

Another encouraging sign in our illustrative art is the fact that those who are engaged in it, not satisfied with the abundant ability which some of them possess, exert every effort to place their art upon a correct foundation by availing themselves of every opportunity they can seize to study from nature. Such is the demand they create for bric-à-brac and articles of *virtu*, that it will not be long before we shall need a Wardour Street in New York to furnish the artists with old helmets, worn tapestries, and mediæval carven chests at reasonable rates. The system of photographing pictures on the block is also helpful in the direction of progress. By this means our department of illustrations is enriched by the alliance of many painters of repute, who have felt that they could not do justice to themselves by drawing directly on wood with India ink. By designing a picture in *camaieu*, either with oils or water-colors, somewhat larger than the block to be engraved, and then reducing it in the camera, one may have far more scope for freedom of handling. The result is simply what we might expect,—greater

individuality and variety in the character of the illustrations, and naturally, therefore, more opportunities for progress in this art.

This phase of book-illustration naturally brings us to a consideration of the subject of engraving, which is now occupying so much attention. Without entering into the question as to whether photographing a design on wood is what some have chosen to call legitimate art or not, or whether it is destructive to the higher qualities of engraving, we think there are few who will not consider that the public are the gainers by the superior quality of the illustration which it affords them. We may say, in passing, that the process is not as recent as is claimed by some. At least twenty years ago designs were photographed on wood, although it is not until recent years that the practice has become common.

Anderson and Adams, the talented pioneers of wood-engraving in America, have been succeeded by many noble engravers, some of whom are fully on a par with our leaders of illustration. We do not propose to enter into a discussion of a question which has aroused considerable discussion of late in art circles. The points of difference between the conservative and the aggressionist may well be left to time, so long as both are animated not so much by personal feeling and prejudice as by a genuine love for the art which they profess. Ample room and verge enough should, however, be allowed to all for the expression of individual styles. Dogmatism has no place in such a question, and the bed of Procrustes should not be imported into this country to cramp the artist in any department of his profession.

Another most encouraging token now apparent in our art is the attention given to etching. In no branch of engraving is there such opportunity for the exhibition of genuine art feeling. While this is the case with all etching, it is of course especially so when the artist etches his own design. For this reason there is scarcely anything that is more offensive than a bad etching, and scarcely anything that more quickly appeals to the enthusiasm of a cultivated artistic mind than such an etching as Bracquemond, Haden, Rajon, or Unger can produce, or R. Swain Gifford among our own artists. It is because such men as he, Messrs. Bellows, Smillie, Farrer, Ferris, Moran, and others we might mention, are producing such promising work here, that we consider this one of the most brilliant auguries now apparent in American art. It remains for the public to encourage our pioneer etchers to greater progress by showing them a kindly appreciation.

In conclusion we emphasize once more the fact that American art at present is largely based upon imitation of other art,—not only of the art of past ages, but of contemporary art in other countries. On the part of the public there is to be noticed a singular apathy regarding the efforts of native artists, with the exception of portrait-painters, who may be said to thrive on the vanity of their sitters. This, however, is no cause for discouragement; for every nation has to pass through its imitative period, and, as we have indicated, the signs are not wanting which give us reason to hope that American art will soon attain the strength and courage to assert its powers in a vigorous manhood.

S. G. W. BENJAMIN.

